Preparing pre-service teachers as emancipatory and participatory action researchers in a teacher education programme

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In this paper I analyse the potential that participatory action research holds for educating pre-service teachers to become more critically reflective and socially conscious. I also describe the rationale for and process of engaging pre-service teachers in their teacher education programme. Involving these candidate teachers in participatory action research (PAR) projects may provide opportunities for aspiring teachers to develop pedagogical content knowledge, examine their beliefs about teaching, and gain confidence in addressing social justice issues. More than merely exposing them to applying the technique of action research, the PAR project encouraged them to become more socially conscious, critical, imaginativ,e and argumentative as teacher-researchers. In the project I used a participatory approach in action research to prepare the pre-service teachers to become emancipatory action researchers. Supporting and fostering inquiring practices is a strategy to help pre-service teachers move beyond just receiving hand-outs in a teacher education programme and beginning to focus on their work with learners and challenges in the real school environment.

Introduction

Since 1994 the implementation of Curriculum 2005, an outcomes-based approach to education in South Africa, has changed dramatically over the past decade. Various educational researchers such as Jansen and Christie (1999) indicated at an early stage that outcomes-based education (OBE) would not be successful in the South African classroom. Despite the review of Curriculum 2005 in 2000, it remained problematic (Jansen, 1999; Chisholm, 2003). In 2009 the Minister of Basic Education once again appointed a task team to review the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12. Recapping and revising the curriculum saw the implementation and introduction of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) in all grades (R-12) in 2012. With this continual revisiting, reviewing, recapping and changing of the curriculum, it becomes increasingly challenging for teacher education programmes to prepare pre-service teachers to become critically reflective practitioners who can take up problems and engage with them. On the flip side, the continuous changes and unsettling circumstances could also encourage teacher education programmes to be more vigilant. Hence they become more critical and innovative as their comfort zones are challenged.

Changing policies demands the implementation of new knowledge and creative and critical ways of thinking about the implementation of these changes. I believe a teacher education programme, that ignores preparing aspirant teachers to seek higher knowledge through continuous self-reflection and research, will end up subverting our national aspirations to become a modern society, with all the benefits that this promises. This point was zealously argued some time ago by Renfrew Christie (1995), whose slogan is: 'No research? No development'.

In Richard Rorty's (1990:117) article 'Education without dogma' he promotes critical thinking and innovative research when he says, higher education is "a matter of inciting doubt and stimulating imagination, thereby challenging the prevailing consensus". Higher education is a form of 'individuation' (a kind of cognitive autonomy). Waghid (2011), in discussing Cavellian scepticism (encouraging critical and imaginative thinking), encourages teacher educators and supervisors to create opportunities for postgraduate students to think, argue, and write imaginative texts.

The question that arises is how? do we bridge the gap between university and schools, which are viewed as nodes of care and support in South Africa where children can receive much needed emotional, social, and spiritual support and guidance. Exposing pre-service teachers to participatory action research projects with transformative agendas can go a long way towards promoting community-researcher partnerships. Community-based participatory research and service-learning are more recent attempts to reconnect academic interests with education and community development (Pine, 2009; Westfall, Van Vorst, Main & Herbert, 2006).

In this paper I reflect on how I attempted to inculcate critical inquiry and reflection and the integration of theory and practice among postgraduate candidate teachers, by exposing them to emancipatory action research in a PAR project. Boog (2003) believes that action research was intended from the outset to be emancipatory and he argues that it is still so. More than merely exposing students to apply the techniques of action research, this PAR project wanted to stimulate and encourage them to become more critical, imaginative and argumentative as teacher-researchers.

Perspectives from the literature

Community-based participatory research and service learning are more recent attempts to reconnect academic interests with education and community development (Brulin, 1998; Ennals, 2004; Kasl & Yorks, 2002; Pine, 2009). Research into the impact of the use of action research in teacher education indicates that teacher candidates can benefit significantly from engaging in the process of inquiry and reflection that action research demands (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005). According to Brown and Tandon (cited in Babbie & Mouton, 2001), participatory action research can be seen as an integrated activity that combines social investigation, educational work and actions. The goal of participatory action research is to work with stakeholders to generate knowledge in order to initiate change (O'Leary, 2004:98).

Participatory action research is not a new idea. PAR originates from the pioneering work of Kurt Lewin (1948) and the Tavistock Institute in the 1940s and all formulations of PAR have in common the idea that research and action must be done 'with' people and not 'on' or 'for' people (Brock & Pettit, 2007; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Swantz, 2008).

In South Africa an emancipatory form of action research as an educational initiative was first discussed in a book entitled *Action research: justified optimism or wishful thinking?*, edited by Flanagan, Breen and Walker (1984). The idea of action research as a research methodology addressing social issues was given more prominence when it became part of a formal and structured Masters' programme in the Education Faculty at the University of the Western Cape in 1987, first under the guidance of Owen van den Berg and then later under Dirk Meerkotter (1996). According to Van den Berg and Meerkotter (1996) all action research had to be liberatory and that it could be a powerful force in freeing South African teachers from the shackles of their socialization.

The idea of emancipatory and participatory action research found a home in the South African anti-apartheid teaching fraternity, where the clarion call for 'People's Education for People's Power' motivated teacher activists to oppose apartheid education in their classrooms. An emancipatory action research strategy is similar to a critical action research approach and is grounded in critical hermeneutics and often in Neo-Marxist theories in sociology (Habermas, 1972), psychology (Holzkamp, 1983), and education (Freire, 1972). Strong practices of emancipatory, critical and participatory action research can be found in, for instance, Australia and New Zealand (Hoogwerf, 2002; Kemmis & McTaggartt, 1998; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996), Austria (Boog, 2003), and South Africa (Walker, 1990).

Our PAR project was inspired by the ideas of Freire (1972), who attempted to use critical pedagogy and dialogical reflective methods in his adult education classes in Brazil. We were also attracted to the way Fals Borda utilised PAR in promoting popular knowledge in his uneasiness with conventional academic circles in developing literacy (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Quigley, 2000), counter-hegemonic education as well as youth development on issues such as violence, racial or sexual discrimination, educational justice and the environment (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fine & Torre, 2008; Noffke & Somekh, 2009).

This type of action research approach seemed to suit our project as its ultimate purpose was not only to empower the students and school community but also the teacher-educator. Regarding this, Walker (1990:61), says that emancipatory action research allows "teachers' voices and those of their students as partners in the research enterprise to be heard as producers of educational knowledge".

The teacher and students are not only concerned with changing and improving their practice in the classroom, but also with changing unequal relations in the wider social context. Here processes in the school are viewed in relation to the macro en-

vironment in which the school is situated. Knowledge is looked at critically in terms of how it is socially constructed and how it, in turn, shapes and hopefully changes reality.

As mentioned already, the PAR project had an emancipatory research agenda. In our deliberations most of the students felt that they wanted to do community based participatory research. In their practice teaching they wanted to take up issues that could make a difference in the school and in the community. This is reflected in the research topics they chose. Initially, I felt that it was going to be difficult as they were all still novice researchers. However most of the students felt confident and theoretically empowered enough to engage in emancipatory action research projects. Reason and Bradbury (2001:1) have the following to say about emancipatory action research:

> Emancipatory action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes grounded in a participatory worldview … It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally, the flourishing of persons and their communities.

In this study I adopted Sagor's (2000) perspective, emphasising that pre-service teachers initiate and direct their own action research project, with the end goal of improving their practice. The degree of individual autonomy offered by this model was consistent with the commitment to empowering pre-service teachers to apply these tools in their own future classrooms. An integral part of the PAR project was that the students participated in the conception and design of the project, data collection, and data analysis.

Context for the study

During the 2011 academic year I engaged the prospective teachers in a participatory action research project as an assignment in the postgraduate certificate course in the Faculty of Education at the University of Stellenbosch. Each candidate teacher had to plan an emancipatory action research project with the aim of improving and enhancing their subject in their teaching practice.

Negotiations and ethical considerations

Before I commenced with the project I felt that it would be ethical to discuss my work and negotiate with the various participants involved in the PAR project. As Ely (1999: 218) puts it: "[q]ualitative research is an ethical endeavour". I could not possibly claim to be empowering the students if I did not involve them at the start of the research process.

Although they all agreed, I nevertheless questioned them as to why they were willing to engage in the research deliberations in class. Their responses were important as I saw them as being key participants in the project. These are some of the remarks:

• Projects are exciting and make class interaction interesting;

- Projects involving social upliftment make one more matured;
- Reflecting on action improves practice;
- Discussing the way we think about things improves thinking about things.

These comments by the students concerning their involvement in the project convey much more than simply a "yes" answer. Besides giving the teacher-researcher a clearer notion of what the students want, they also go a long way in clearing the conscience of the teacher as researcher. It was conveyed to the students that as co-researchers they had to be actively involved in conceptualising and designing the project, collecting and also analysing data. They had to be prepared to be interviewed by stakeholders, complete survey forms, keep a diary and, if they were comfortable about it, to hand in their diaries to be scrutinised and analysed at the end of the project. In my deliberations with them I felt that I was being ethical. Ethics is concerned with how one treats the individuals with whom one interacts and am involved with (Mathison, Ross & Cornett, 1993). I was however, cautioned by the point in Chevalier and Buckles (2013) that norms and ethical conduct and their implications may have to be revisited as the project unfolds and that PAR cannot limit discussions about ethics to the design and proposal phase.

Methodology and data collection

The research methodology used for collecting my data was qualitative and interpretive. The qualitative part of my research project took the form of a PAR process. Our common vision was that of placing social issues concerning social justice high on our teaching agenda and developing a pedagogy of hope in our schools. Interpretivism aims to move away from obtaining knowledge through experimental manipulation of human subjects towards understanding by means of conversations with subjects. Social reality is viewed as socially constructed based on a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation of the internal, meaningful behaviour of people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The data-collection techniques we used as a collective were our field notes, student assistant, interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. In this research project the focus group technique was especially useful. The focus group technique is one of the most effective qualitative methods for studying ideas in group contexts. In particular, it can explore group interaction, attitudes and cognition, and arrive at a synergy of ideas, because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Zuber- Skerritt, 2012).The student assistant who was an action research Master's student provided our class with valuable feedback regarding the completed projects of the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students. Besides commenting that topics chosen by pre-service teachers were interesting and refreshing, she also contributed significantly to the analysis of the constraints the pre-service teachers were exposed to. I had two focus group sessions with four student volunteers. Two discussions were held lasting about 30 minutes each. The first focus group meeting was at the mid-point of the module to review progress and learning, and gather suggestions for improvement. The

second discussion was at the end of the module and sought particularly to evaluate and analyse which aspects of the project could be improved.

Participatory Action Research project guidelines and procedures
First the student teachers had to identify a problematic issue they intended to address at a school, or an innovative classroom approach whereby they (and perhaps some colleagues) would seek to introduce change into their classroom(s), school or community. They had to write up a brief outline (approximately 2 pages) indicating:
a)   what the problem and/or innovation is;
b)   why they are concerned and/or keen to introduce the innovation;
c)   what they intend to do;
d)   what kind of evidence they could collect to help them make a judgement about what happens as a consequence of their action, and how they intend collecting such evidence.

Next they had to plan an approach that would address the problem or bring about the desired change. This should preferably be done in collaboration with one or more of their colleagues who share some of their concern. This outline had to be handed in on 18 March 2011 as a research proposal. In the next stage they had to put their plan into action over a period of time, and they had to monitor or observe how their actions were experienced by all involved. It was emphasised that not only would their action require careful preparation, but the means by which they monitored and gathered evidence of what was happening would need to be carefully thought through and "set up" in advance. Because change is a complex process, and does not occur neatly as planned, they were encouraged to think critically about what was actually happening while it was happening, as far as possible. And, after it happened, they had to try to understand analytically what had happened. In other words, they had to reflect on (1) what happened in the light of what they originally planned, and (2) their original plans and thinking in the light of subsequent experience. As far as possible, they had to write up their actions, evidence and reflections as they proceeded, at least in rough draft. All projects had to be submitted by 7 October 2011. Some topics chosen by students included:
•   The fear factor in Mathematics
•   Eating disorders in schools
•   Assessing the masses – OBE as a form of assessment
•   Using participatory action research to improve and facilitate group work in a multicultural classroom
•   Enhancing the teaching of science
•   Making difficult and dreary concepts in science fascinating through the use of music
•   Re-introducing the importance of physical education in the classroom
•   Sexuality education in school: making learners aware of the dangers of being sexually active at an early stage

- Dance, dance, dance some more! Researching dance as an alternative option to a potentially oppressive school sports curriculum in a South African high school context
- The silence of racism: closing the gap of communication and misunderstanding in the school system.

Findings and discussion

The findings of the study are discussed below to give an overall perspective on the developmental needs of pre-service teachers to become critical teacher researchers in the rapidly changing knowledge economy. In my own reflection I realised that most of my efforts spent on teaching preparation and especially post-lecture feedback for students far exceeded the actual instruction time allocated. Therefore, most of my gains also exceeded the lecture time frame. Very often, I was wondering whether this PAR project was too complex for the students. However, their motivation and enthusiasm gave me a sense of achievement.

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data collection. First, the pre-service teachers were able to articulate the steps in the action research process and could describe how to use them in their everyday classroom practice. At the end of the final semester students wrote final papers depicting their journey of learning to be participatory action researchers. Most students found the process to be helpful and planned to do participatory action research in their future classrooms and immediate communities. Most student teachers reflected on how they were able to understand their teaching practices more fully by engaging in this PAR project.

Second, pre-service teachers' action research projects focused on meeting the needs of all the students in their respective classrooms. I was impressed and intrigued by the diversity and the scope of the research questions the students formulated. Student teachers used this class assignment to inform their teaching practices in particular classroom situations which they found challenging to address. Each student teacher recognised the potential to use action research as a means of exploring how to improve his or her teaching practice based on the particular needs of his or her learners, but focused more globally on classroom issues than was expected (i.e. managing difficult learners such as bullies and motivating learners with little self-confidence).

Finally, it was evident that some of the action research projects were not without constraints. This was also evident from the comments of my student assistant and from the feedback I received from students in the PGCE programme. Amongst the comments of the student assistant were the following:

- Some of the action research projects are too over-ambitious;
- There are definitely going to be ethical problems – especially the guests they intend inviting to their classrooms during their practice teaching;
- Time constraints as some of the projects seemed too large.

This last point was also emphasised in the focus group discussions as it underlined the

idea that the PAR project needs to be small and manageable. Another limitation of the project was that the pre-service teachers involved were at different levels of understanding action research and more so PAR. It was evident in some of their projects that some students had no, or very limited, grasp of what action research entails.

Together, the community of pre-service teachers, student assistants and myself as teacher-educator found new ways in which to think about schools and schooling, i.e. new ways in which to think about the work of teaching and learning and about teaching in a changing South Africa. According to some of the pre-service teachers, collaborative participatory action research changed not only the learners and schools they encountered, but most importantly their outlook as future teachers.

Educational significance and implications for the field
For all of us, and here I include the student assistant, this PAR project was significant because it provided us with evidence that action research, if done collaboratively and in a participatory way, can empower pre-service teachers by giving them the tools to become effective practitioner social justice researchers. Also, the project enhanced the students' action research experience and bridged the theory-practice divide when we integrated the theory-based curriculum studies course with their practice teaching experience. Simultaneously, by modelling collaborative action research, we grew professionally ourselves.

Regarding the significance to pre-service education, analysing the final reports indicated to me that pre-service teachers are capable of selecting and carrying out projects beneficial to their learners. Furthermore, they indicated their enjoyment in choosing an issue that was significant for them as well as the satisfaction derived from the implementation and analysis of their project; they also indicated that they intend to actively research their practice as in-service teachers. Some of the students also expressed an intention to take their projects to Masters' and Doctoral level. What was especially satisfying to me was that most of the pre-service teachers could detect the difference between mere technical action research and emancipatory action research and PAR. Most of all, the pre-service teachers felt empowered as active agents in their own professional development.

Conclusion
Finally, PAR with an emancipatory agenda, though not a magical cure for all that ails education, can become a powerful tool supporting the transformation of our society in a very uncertain 21st century. My optimism comes from my personal experience and the inquiry I undertook and still try to implement as a teacher-researcher. As a teacher-educator, I am encouraged by the students' responses. I believe this project has made a significant contribution to the empowerment of pre-service teachers in our programme and I hope this sense of efficacy will extend to their future classroom practice and develop more social conscious and social justice teacher-researchers.

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